

Garden care while you travel (Part 2)

The garden prep for our summer absence has been paying off. Yesterday my daughter took me on a virtual garden tour on Facetime. Things are looking good! The native sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) are amazing, reaching 6-7 ft. tall. And the tomato plants have held up well through the heat wave with temperatures in excess of 100° F. Of course, thanks go to Nick and Lizzie for looking after things. The thick layer of mulch and subsurface watering must be helping too.

I planted tomatoes to incentivize garden visits by my kids while we are away. After all, who can resist garden tomatoes? This may be a great idea but as all gardeners know, it comes at a price. Tomatoes and other vegetables require regular water - none of this once a month kind of thing described in my last blog post, [Garden care while you travel, Part 1](#). As promised in that post, here is a description of the drip irrigation that I set up for the front yard vegetable garden and herb containers.

Drip irrigation for vegetable garden

Vegetable gardens need almost daily water, and it is best to irrigate early in the day. For this reason alone, it was important to automate the irrigation system. In the past I connected poly-tubing to a hose with a backflow device and a pressure regulator – all standard parts of a micro-irrigation system. A timer attached to a spigot then controlled the watering schedule.

The problem with this set up is that the water spigot is always open; the timer turns on to release the water and off when no water is delivered. The timer, therefore, is under pressure and is prone to leaking. I was not comfortable relying on it with no one there to check it often.

Irrigation retrofit

While mulling this over, my husband suggested that we connect the tubing to one of the unused irrigation zones of the front yard underground sprinkler system. Although I am familiar with retrofitting lawn sprinklers for drip, it just hadn't occurred to me at this time. What a great solution!

Turns out it is easy to retrofit popup spray irrigation heads for drip and low-volume micro-spray systems. After another few trips to the irrigation store I had what I needed. All I needed to do was unscrew the Rainbird 1800 spray heads and replace them with the [Rainbird drip irrigation retrofit kit](#).

I replaced two of the four sprinkler heads with the retrofit parts and capped the remaining two. One

of the former sprinkler heads is outfitted to supply water to the tomatoes, artichokes, onions, and other in ground vegetables. The second head provides drip irrigation to large containers of herbs.

Irrigation controller

We have an indoor irrigation controller that services each of the five front yard irrigation zones. Zone 4, as noted above in the caption of the blurry picture of the valves, was being used to water the west side front lawn - which is now the vegetable garden in question.

The timer has three program possibilities, Program A, B and C. I am not using Program C. Program A controls the watering schedule for the remaining lawn, trees, and shrubs, and is set to go off once a week. I really wish this timer could be set to go off less frequently, like once every two weeks! When I am at home I change the timer frequently based on weather conditions. In summer I usually water the front lawn about once every ten days and the trees and shrubs less frequently and for a longer period of time. When the lawn looks dry, I set the timer to go off early the next day, and then I turn it off. However, being away, I set Program A to provide water weekly.

Timer for vegetable garden

Program B (see timer picture, below) is now dedicated to watering the vegetable garden and is set to go off several times each week (as shown in the following picture). Yesterday when I spoke with my daughter about how the vegetables are doing with the extremely hot weather in So Cal, I asked her to change the timer to a daily watering schedule. Later I changed my mind since the plants are doing well and had her return it to the original setting of roughly every other day.

It was a lot of work to set up the watering systems for trees, shrubs, lawn, and a vegetable garden. However, it all seems to be working. I miss my Southern California garden, though I do not miss temps in the triple digits. Now it is time to turn my attention to the cool, cloudy, drizzly, and thoroughly lovely place surrounding me, Orcas Island.